



Arden Friel in his gun workshop at Clover Lick.

Gunsmith on the Greenbrier

Arden Friel, 54, has been making guns for 39 years
but still doesn't consider himself professional.

BY WILLIAM C. BLIZZARD

Before the Civil War was over, the muzzle-loading rifle was laid away in history's attic, replaced by breech-loaders like the Sharps carbine and its successors.

Yet today in West Virginia you may order a new flintlock or percussion-cap muzzle-loader from one of at least four Mountaineer gun shops which are well known for manufacturing the antique weapons. Such shops are located in Elkins, Webster Springs, Buckhannon, and Clover Lick.

Clover Lick, in case you didn't know, is in Pocahontas County, near Stony Bottom. It is 15 miles from Marlinton, and nine miles from Cass, accessible by blacktop road which might be mistaken, in poor light by a poor engineer who was also a poor woodsman, for a fat blacksnake.

Arden Friel is the Clover Lick gunsmith. His home perches beside the Greenbrier River, and his shop, which houses a fantastic conglomeration of machinery, gun parts, shavings, sawdust, tools, and dirt, leans against a nearby hill.

Friel, who is now 54, says he has been making guns since he was 15. But he doesn't consider himself a professional.

"I was a machinist," he said, "for a while in Cleveland, but most all my life I was a coal miner in West Virginia. I worked in several places, and was always a hand loader. One of the reasons I quit the mines was the new machines that come in. No more hand loading now, and that's what I liked to do."

Arden Friel does not appear to be the sort of man who could be hurried or excited, even by the possibility of sudden fortune. His living room is filled largely by a wood-burning stove and dozens of guns in need of repair. For Friel does a big repair business in addition to manufacturing hand-made weapons.

Other rifles, pistols, and shotguns in good working order festoon the walls.

"Only have one gun for sale now," he said, "and it's a modern gun, a varmint rifle. He handed me a beautiful weapon, a hand-crafted .22-250 rifle with a Douglas (G. Douglas of Charleston) barrel, Mauser action, and an unusual stock made from a black walnut supplied by a commercial dealer."

"That stock," said Friel, "is laminated walnut and maple. There's a base for a scope mount on this gun."

Telescopic sights are mounted on several high-velocity rifles for the simple reason that they reach out hundreds of yards to targets barely visible to the naked eye. The slug no bigger in diameter than that in the .22 at the carnival shooting gallery, but the powder charge in the .22-250 could blow a carnival rifle to pieces, if it were possible to get the bigger shell in the chamber.

Friel's biggest order right now is from Kyle Neighbors of Cass. Neighbors has a museum at Cass, but is working on a more ambitious project for which he wants Friel to make him 10 muzzle-loading rifles. Friel says he may do it and he may not.

Neighbors' idea for his new enterprise at Cass is an interesting one which should be profitable. At the point on Bald Knob where the Cass Scenic Railroad stops he plans to set up a "wagon train" of Conestogas, 1

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At Clover Lick, in case you didn't know, is Cahontas County, near Stony Bottom. It is about 10 miles from Marlinton, and nine miles from Cass, accessible by blacktop road. It might be mistaken, in poor light by an engineer who was also a poor woodsman, for a fat blacksnake.

Here Friel is the Clover Lick gunsmith. He sits on a perch beside the Greenbrier River, and his shop, which houses a fantastic accumulation of machinery, gun parts, tools, sawdust, tools, and dirt, leans against a rocky hill.

Friel, who is now 54, says he has been making guns since he was 15. But he doesn't consider himself a professional.

"I was a machinist," he said, "for a while in Cleveland, but most all my life I was a miner in West Virginia. I worked in several places, and was always a hand loader. One of the reasons I quit the mines was because of the new machines that come in. No more loading now, and that's what I liked to do."

Friel does not appear to be the sort of man who could be hurried or excited, even in the possibility of sudden fortune. His living room is filled largely by a wood-burning stove and dozens of guns in need of repair. Friel does a big repair business in addition to manufacturing hand-made weapons. Rifles, pistols, and shotguns in good order festoon the walls.

"I have one gun for sale now," he said, "it's a modern gun, a varmint rifle. It's a 22-250 rifle with a Douglas (G. R. Douglas of Charleston) barrel, Mauser action, an unusual stock made from a blank cut by a commercial dealer."

"The stock," said Friel, "is laminated walnut and maple. There's a base for a scope on this gun."

Scenic sights are mounted on such velocity rifles for the simple reason that they reach out hundreds of yards to targets visible to the naked eye. The slug is larger in diameter than that in the old time carnival shooting gallery, but the charge in the 22-250 could blow the target rifle to pieces, if it were possible to hit the bigger shell in the chamber.

Friel's biggest order right now is from the Neighbors of Cass. Neighbors has a muzzle-loader, but is working on a more ambitious project for which he wants Friel to make him 10 muzzle-loading rifles. Friel says he'll do it and he may not.

Friel's idea for his new enterprise at Neighbors' is an interesting one which should be profitable. At the point on Bald Knob where the scenic railroad stops, he plans to

a rifle range supplied with muzzle-loaders and other antique guns.

Scenic Railroad customers will, of course, be invited to shoot the muzzle-loaders for a fee. Perhaps one day imitative tourists may be persuaded to come streaming out of the woods toward the wagon trail just to add a dash of commercial novelty.

Screaming "Indians" are not at present in the plans of Kyle Neighbors, who won't get after this one. Perhaps it is just as well to forget the pseudo-Indians. Most is nice, but Cheat Mountain is also nice, unspoiled and silent.

Neighbors is a good friend of Arden Friel's, and has a high opinion of his craftsmanship. Neighbors himself is something of a gun fan, with a huge collection of muzzle-loaders, many of them made by Friel.

Friel says that if he were to work steadily he could, with all materials and a barrel at hand, turn out a muzzle-loader in five days.

"I can make my own barrel," he said. "But it's cheaper for me to buy them. I get them from Douglas at Charleston."

In actual practice, Friel averages about one completed rifle every two months. For muzzle-loader stocks which extend the length of the rifle, the gunsmith cuts his own maple.

"This is the soft kind," he told me, "not the hard maple. We call it the fiddleback, because of the wood pattern."

"Generally, it takes about three years to air dry the piece of wood for a stock, and then I'll put it in a building over a stove to dry some more."

When the wood is sufficiently seasoned, Friel cuts it to rough shape, then puts the stock blank in a kind of lathe he has made himself. This piece of machinery routs the groove in the forearm part of the stock to accept the barrel, which may be hexagonal or round.

"That soft maple," said Friel, "is getting awful scarce. I don't varnish my stocks, generally use just stain and oil finish."

Most of Friel's muzzle-loaders are of the percussion type, although he makes some flintlocks, an earlier variety which worked on the same general principle as a modern cigarette lighter, except that sparks from flint and steel ignited gunpowder, not a gas.

Muzzle-loading rifles can be accurate, as Civil War statistics show. Their very real disadvantage was that they were slow—slow to reload in case the first shot went wild.

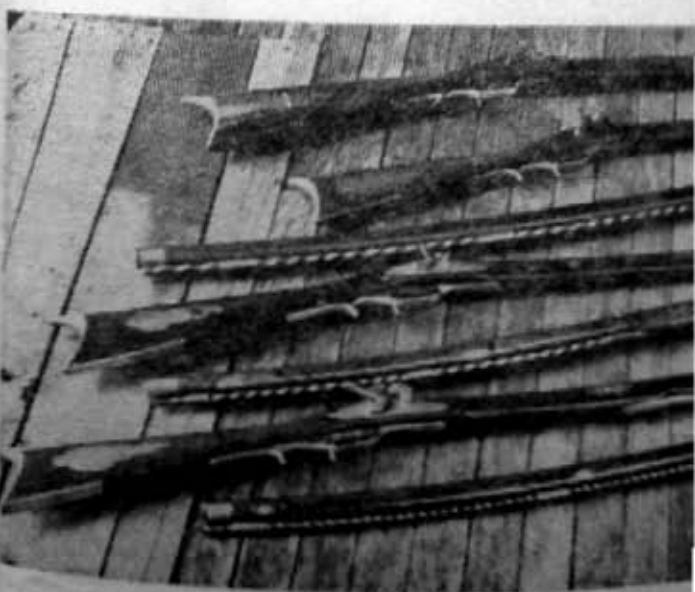
To cope with this slowness, rifle makers and shooters took all possible pains to see that the first shot didn't miss. One insurance feature was the set trigger. That is, muzzle-loaders had two triggers, and you pulled one to set the other, which could be adjusted to fire at the slightest touch.

If you want to buy a new muzzle-loader, or if you own an old one which could be repaired, you might remember Arden Friel of Clover Lick. But give him plenty of time before you inquire as to his present progress.

Like the muzzle-loaders he makes, Friel has a reputation for being a slow, but mighty, mighty sure. Friel's primary business is making rifles. He'll give it up to you to get the lead out.



Friel surrounded by a few of



These seven Friel rifles are on

supplied with muzzle-loaders
gun guns.

and customers will, of course,
shoot the muzzle-loaders for a
few day imitations which may
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bit novelty.

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a limited range.



Friel surrounded by a few of the guns he has in shop for repair.

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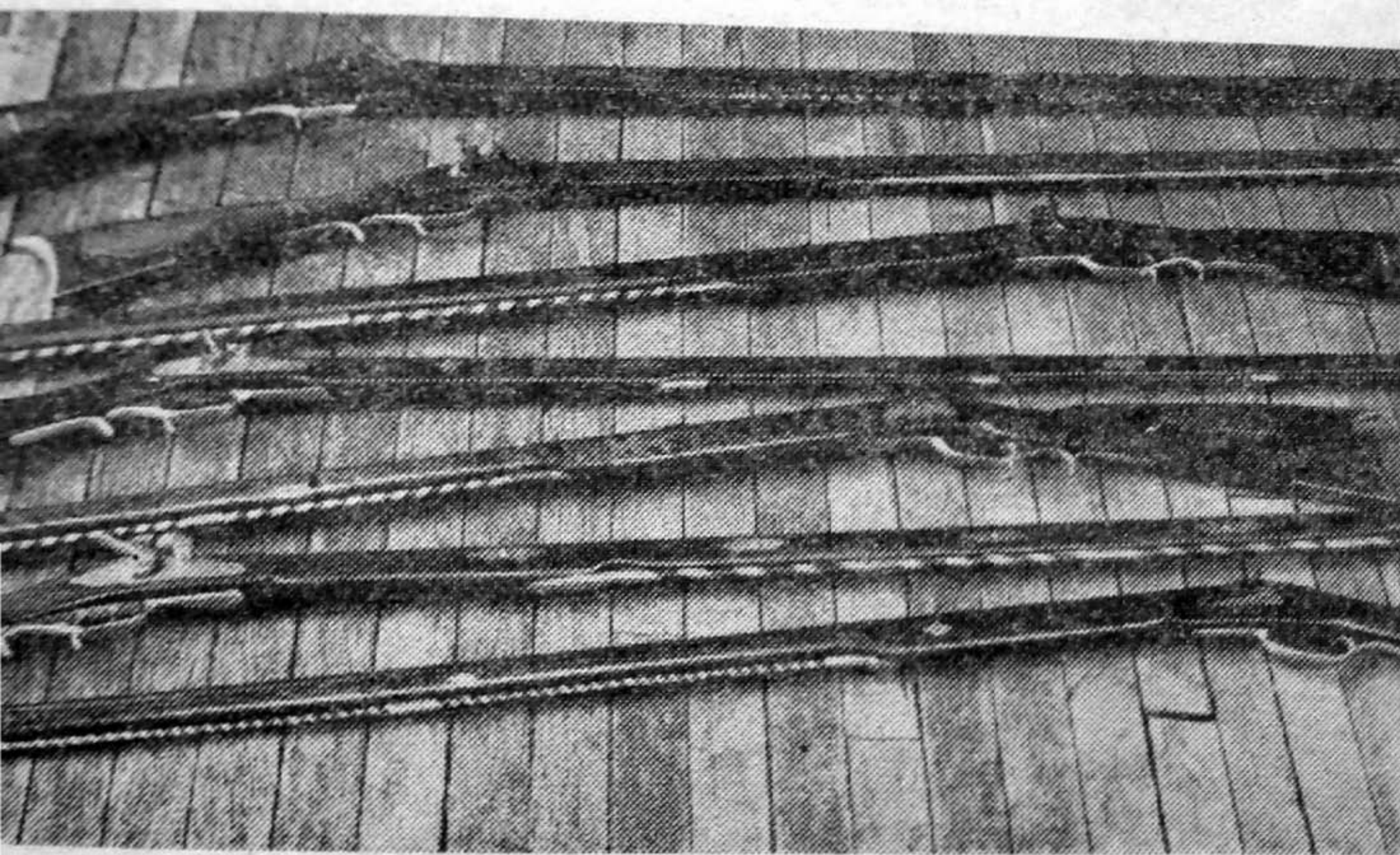
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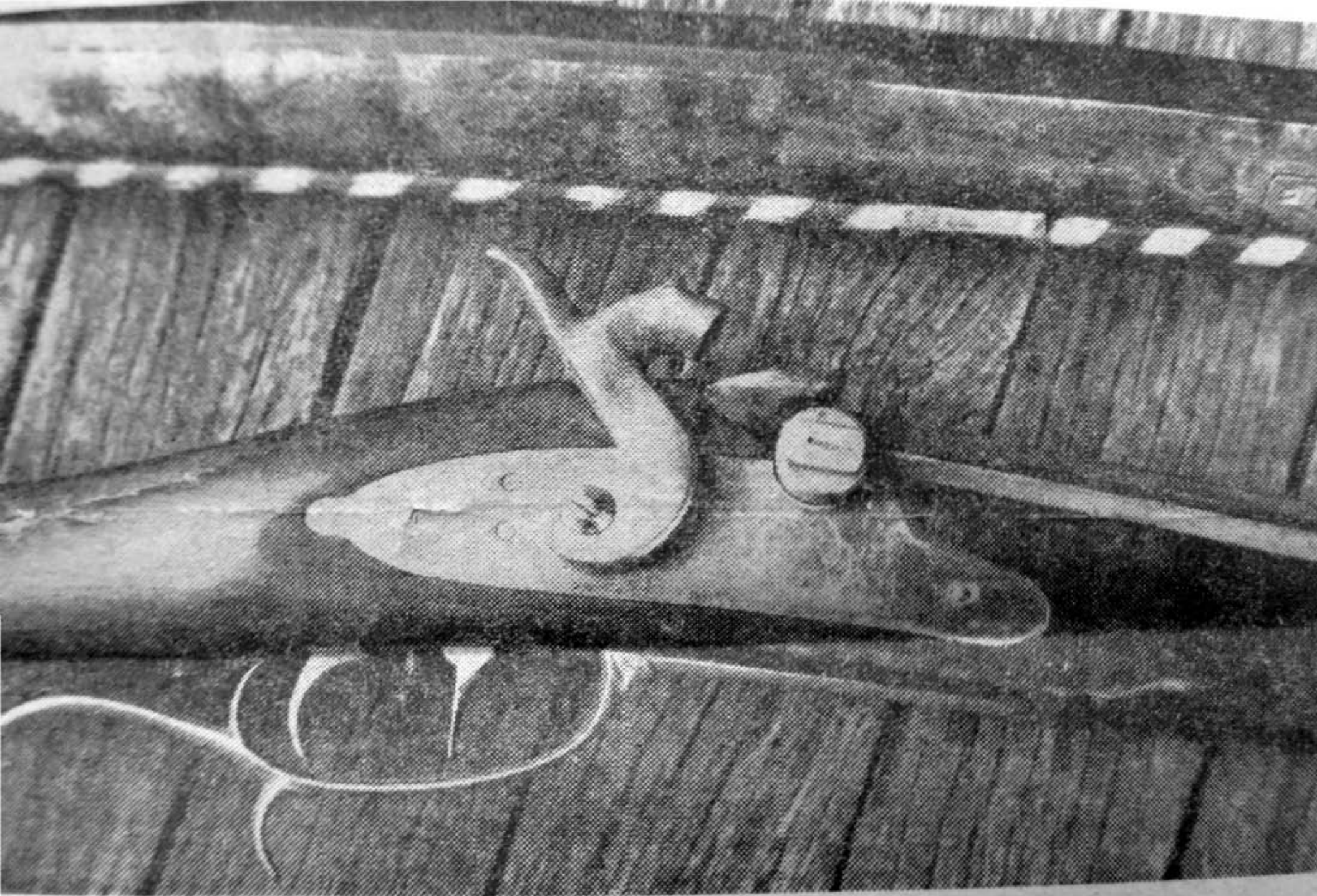
...by a few of the guns he has in shop for repair.



These seven Friel rifles are owned by Kyle Neighbor of Cass.







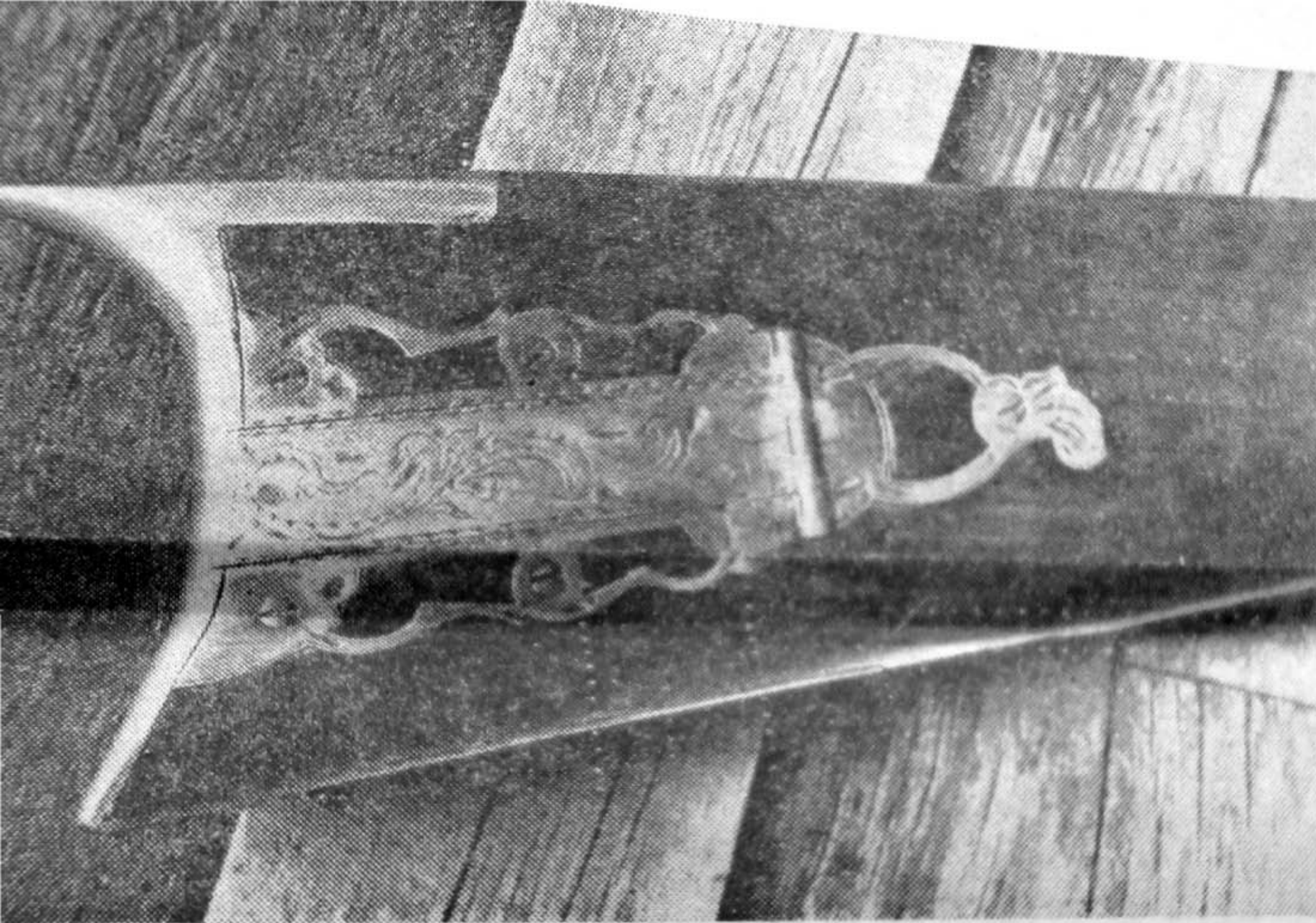
Flintlock converted to percussion cap type.



Hammers of double-barrel shotgun Friel made for his son.

SUNDAY GAZETTE-MAIL

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Detail of brass work at end of stock on one of Friel's rifles.